

HIERONYMUS FRACASTORIUS

A BRIEF SURVEY OF HIS LIFE AND WORK ON SYPHILIS

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In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, while the Italian Renaissance was rapidly gaining momentum, there was born in the old city of Verona, in or about the year 1478, a boy, son of Paolo Filippo and Camilla de Mascarelli. This child, one Girolamo Fracastoro or Fracastorio, as Bruno prefers, was so blest in after-life that one is almost convinced that his destiny was directed by the same gods he so often eulogized in his various poems.

His ancestors, the Fracastorii, according to Cartolari's "Noble Families of Verona," were members of the Council from 1406 to 1771. They were distinguished members of their community and possessed considerable wealth. His great-grandfather, Paolo Filippo, a warm supporter of the Venetian conquest, was one of a small group selected to present to the Doge of Venice the keys of Verona, in 1405. The adherence of Verona to Venice, strangely enough, existed until 1797, when it was dissolved by Napoleon, after his successful Italian campaign. By a stroke of fate, fame placed its olive branch on the brow of only two members of this large family, both physicians, one Jerome Fracastor and the other, his ancestor, Aventino de Fracastoro, who was practicing medicine as early as 1325. Aventino was the medical adviser to the powerful Ghibelline family of della Scala, and may have been consulted by Can Grande the Second. He died in 1368, and he reposes within a sculptured tomb in the Church of San Fermo. Beneath the coffin is an epitaph stating in Latin that he was a famous physician and astrologer.

Like all great men, particularly those living in the long ago, there are many legends in reference to Fracastorius' early life. The statement that he was born with his mouth closed so that an operation was necessary seems hard to believe, despite the fact of its attestation by that well known scholar, Julius Caesar Scaliger, who was a neighbor of Fracastor's until 1529. It is also related that Fracastor's mother was killed

by lightning while holding him in her arms, and that he escaped unharmed. Yet it is noted that she was still living in 1501, at which time Fracastor was registered in the parish of St. Agnes as 23 years of age. Fracastor as a child was not robust and spent much time at his father's villa in Caffi, situated about 15 miles from Verona. At this villa, where Fracastor spent most of his life and wrote the majority of his works, he was most happy. This small estate was situated on the shore of Lake Garda, on the slopes of Monte Baldo with the river Adige at its back. The view from the house was unobstructed on all sides except the north; toward Verona and the Adige valley it was beautiful. The hills surrounding the lake were covered with olive and lemon trees. It was truly an inspiring spot for a poet. After completion of his primary studies Fracastor was sent to Padua, where the exiled Dante lived for a time. This university town was the center of learning, not only for the Republic of Venice but for the world at large. The great university was the Alma Mater of such men as Vesalius, Fallopius, Sanctorius, Galileo, Copernicus and Erasmus. The reputation of the university grew with the years, for as late as April 25, 1602, William Harvey obtained from Padua the degree of doctor of physic after four years in a windowless amphitheater, listening by candlelight to the lectures of Fabricius, who was the greatest physiologist of his time.

Fortunately, Fracastor's father was a great friend of Girolamo della Torre, the professor of medicine at the University of Padua, who was himself a Veronese. This association facilitated the entry into the university of young Fracastor, who was soon on most friendly terms with della Torre's three sons: Marcantonio, lecturing on anatomy at the university, and for a time professor of anatomy at Pavia; Giambattista, the noted astronomer, and Raimondo, who devoted his life to literature. Among his famous teachers were the Bolognese anatomist, Alessandro Achillini (1463-1518), Pietro Trapolini (1454-1505), a lecturer on medicine, and Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525), astronomer, physician and philosopher, who was an early exponent of the school of naturalism and was opposed to the religion of his day. Fracastor was not influenced by Pomponazzi's teaching. He was not fond of controversy, especially if of a religious nature, and he numbered among his friends many churchmen, some good and some bad. He was particularly unfortunate in his dedications. Cardinal Pietro Bembo, to whom he dedicated his famous "*Syphilis sive Morbus Gallicus*," was one of the numerous lovers of Lucrezia Borgia and composed not a few sonnets of obscene character. It was this same cardinal who urged Sadoleto to "avoid the Epistles of St. Paul lest his barbarous style should spoil your taste." Equally corrupt was Alessandro Farnese the elder, who as Paul III commenced his papal career in 1534, and to whom Fracastor dedicated some of his works.

Fracastor was a diligent student at the university, where he excelled in mathematics, geology, botany, philosophy and astronomy and later in medicine. He studied medicine so assiduously that he soon won special attention, was admitted to the daily meetings of the Faculty and was even allowed at times to lecture.

Fracastor was appointed lecturer in logic in 1501, and held the position until 1507, when teaching at the University of Padua ceased because of war between the League of Cambrai and the Venetian State.

Fracastor joined Alviano, the Venetian commander-in-chief, at his stronghold, Pordenone, in the Udine, where he was joined by other exiles from the university, among them the poet, Andrea Navagero.

In April, 1509, having heard of the death of his father, Fracastor returned to Verona in an attempt to save his property from the invaders, who a month later defeated Alviano at Agnadello.

For eight years Verona was occupied by about eight thousand troops of mixed nationality, with Germans in the great majority. They murdered and looted at will. The most unsanitary conditions prevailed, with consequent outbreaks of the plague, during which Fracastor retired with his family to his villa on Lake Garda. This retreat in the face of danger earned for him considerable opprobrium not wholly undeserved, when coupled with his desertion of his patron, Alviano, whenever the latter went into battle. By 1518, Verona became tranquil.

Fracastor, having married in Padua in 1500, was then living in Verona near the Church of St. Euphemia. His wife was a native of Vicenza, and they had five children. Two, Paolo and Giulio, died between 1515 and 1516. Giambattista and Isabella are not mentioned in history. The remaining son, Paolo Filippo, was born in 1517, survived both his parents and was still living in 1584. During the last years of his father's life he managed the estate at Caffi.

There is no doubt that Fracastor's most active years in medical practice were between 1509 and 1530. His frequent absences from Verona, his devotion to his literary muse and his love for Caffi must have greatly interfered with his Veronese practice. He had also a serious rival for medical supremacy in his native city, in the person of Gion Battista Montano. On the other hand, Fracastor's reputation as a physician was so high that one must conclude that he had a large medical experience, with favorable results from treatment. No matter how perfect a poet he may have been, it would be foolish to suppose that he became medical adviser to Cardinal Farnese, to Giberti, Bishop of Verona, and to probably many other prelates and noble families on the strength of his literary work alone.

It is said that he was called to the bedside of Catherine de Medici, Queen of France, and that Marguerite of Navarre invited him to her court. These two statements, however, are not considered true by Prof. Wilmer Cave Wright in her scholarly and searching biography.

With his retirement from practice in Verona, Fracastor spent most of his time at Caffi. He wrote, botanized and, in his cellar, prepared his famous diascordium and many other remedies. He was an expert in cosmography and made many wooden globes on which he would depict either the New or the Old World. He was deeply interested in astronomy, as evidenced by his "*Homocentrica sive de Stellis*," published in 1538. He entertained his many friends frequently, especially Rannusio, Navagero and the della Torres. In the evening he was fond of strolling on the slopes of Monte Baldo with his grandchildren, teaching them astronomy.

His death occurred on Aug. 6, 1553, at Caffi, while at dinner. He lost his power of speech, but was conscious enough to try by signs to make his servants understand that he wished to be cupped, repeatedly raising his hand to his head as if to indicate the seat of his affliction, but he was misunderstood and nothing was done. He died peacefully, in the early evening. He was loaded with posthumous honors, one of them being the great monument voted by the Council of Verona on Nov. 21, 1555. Strangely enough, perhaps due to the fact that both his parochial church in Verona and that in Caffi bore the same name of St. Eufemia, his burial-place is unknown. On the testimony of Barbarani, and after a personal visit to the church in Verona, Professor Wright believes that Fracastor was buried in the small church at Caffi, which has since been destroyed. Fracastor was described, by an anonymous contemporary, in a prefix to the first edition of his works, as short of stature but with broad shoulders. He had long black hair, his eyes were brown and his beard was well kept. He had a dislike for pungent debates and looked askance on the bitter, raucous and heated controversies of some of his fellow scientists. His gentle nature and retiring character earned for him a reputation for taciturnity that he did not deserve, for with his intimates he abandoned himself readily to the joys of scientific discussion. It can be said that he had no real enemies; even Montano forgave Fracastor's acrid comment in reference to his appointment as physician to Cardinal de Medici, and wrote a laudatory epistle on his death.

The only detailed mention of syphilis by Fracastor is in the celebrated "*Syphilis or the French Disease*" and "*Contagion, Contagious Diseases and Their Treatment*," the latter, by far, his most important contribution to medicine. Sir William Osler believed that the famous "*Syphilis sive Morbus Gallicus*" ranked second only to the "*Regimen Sanitatis*" of the School of Salernum as the most popular poem in medical literature. The original edition, a small quarto, was printed in Verona in August, 1530, but there is reason to believe that it existed in manuscript as early as 1525. It created tremendous enthusiasm. Unfortunately, the extravagant praise of his contemporaries in reference to its

lyrical qualities clouded for a time its value as a medical treatise. Alfred Fournier, whose admirable French translation appeared in 1870, stated in his preface that he considered the work a serious and invaluable medical contribution of great scientific importance, with the causes, symptoms and treatment of the disease graphically presented. This opinion is heartily shared by most of those who have read the poem carefully. It ran through six editions in the original Latin within thirty years of its first appearance—a remarkable record, considering the times. It is divided in three books. The first describes the origin, causes and symptoms of the disease, the second mentions the remedies used and the third is devoted to the praise and description of guaiac. Among the interesting facts in the book is his denial that syphilis was of American origin and brought to Europe by the Spaniards. He mentioned most definitely and clearly the long period of incubation and the genital sore of the first stage, and the temperature, papular eruption, hoarseness and nocturnal pains of the second, but it is in his description of the tertiary stage that his poetic license takes wing, for example, quoting him:

A noble youth of great beauty and strength neglected one of the many nymphs of the countryside, whereupon she called, not in vain, for vengeance, to the gods. Then O Heaven the foul disease overspread his wretched limbs, and his big manly bones were distended with filthy abscesses! Deforming ulcers, O pity him ye gods, fed on his beautiful eyes, mirrors of heavenly light, and ate away his diseased nostrils into a hideous wound and the peasant girls bewept him.

In book II, Fracastor advised the use of plain food, plenty of sunshine, much sweating, and abstention from alcohol, and, probably as a prophylactic measure, also abstention from sexual intercourse. He advocated touching the mucous patches of the mouth with niter and water medicated with green copperas. He highly praised metallic mercury, mixed with hogs's, horse's or bear's grease. He was particularly fond of mixing it with black hellebore, dry orris, strong-smelling asafetida, olive oil and sulphur. Mercurial stomatitis was treated with a decoction of pomegranate. Book III is mostly devoted to the description of guaiac, its discovery in Haiti by Columbus and his men and its importation to Europe. The end of the book is devoted to the well known story of Syphilus, the shepherd of King Alcithous, whose flocks died from heat and drought caused by the god Sirius. Syphilus in a rage substituted the worship of Alcithous for that of the gods; the latter, incensed, visited the earth with the dread disease, Syphilus being the first victim.

In the chapter on syphilis in the "Contagion, Contagious Diseases and Their Treatment," which was printed in 1546, Fracastor first mentioned instances of extragenital infection. He stated that gummas were much more frequently observed than twenty years previously. For the

first time he noted the presence of specific alopecia, which at first was thought to be due to mercury, and he ended the chapter with the prediction that syphilis was rapidly nearing its end and would eventually cease to propagate itself. What a pity that his prediction proved erroneous! What thousands could have been preserved from misery had he been right!

May I, in closing, express the hope that this brief, necessarily incomplete and humble effort to tell something of Fracastor may stimulate others to search the past and, by so doing, increase their admiration of these pioneers of our beloved profession, of whom Jerome Fracastor was only one.

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